



EVEN
STRANGER
THINGS

Even Stranger Things by DufferSister

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Summary: Mike and El share a kiss at the dance, and everything seems perfect. Until The Upside Down finds new ways of creeping in and turning these kids worlds...well...upside down. Join the gang on another adventure, filled with Even Stranger Things.

1. The Dance

THE DANCE

'So do you prefer "El" or "Jane"?' Mike asked gently as they sat outside in the cool evening air, taking a breather from the dance raging on inside. The boys looked to be having a good time before they had snuck out to have some time alone.

'You did that thing again,' El replied, with a serious look on her face.

'I kissed you.' Mike stated, matter-of-factly. 'D-did you like it?' he stammered, shortly after.

'Kissed.' She rolled the word around in her mouth for a second. 'I liked it,' she decided with a small smile, 'and "El". It's what I heard. For the 353 days.'

El spoke more - Mike noticed - but she preferred the safety of short sentences, and he adored that.

'I missed you so much, when you were gone. I thought I'd lost you forever,' he said, his voice breaking on the words. It had been almost a year and he had tried to talk to her every day - never accepting that she was truly gone, and she wasn't. His heart was filled with happiness.

'Missed. Is that what it's called? It hurt. Is that missed?'

'The root word is "miss", but the feeling happened in the past, so it becomes "missed". I don't miss you anymore, because you're right here,' he answered, lacing his fingers between hers.

'I missed you too. Like mama. I saw you. I called your name. You couldn't hear me. It hurt. I like this now,' she smiled shyly and rested her head in the crook of Mike's neck. She remembered when Hopper had broken the TV - how broken she felt at the thought of not being able to see Mike, but she could see him now.

Just then, the emergency exit door next to them flung open and Dustin came bounding out of the gym.

'Hey lovebirds, we need to cut this short, Will is a planeswalker, he can see the upside-down, it doesn't look good,' he gasped.

Eleven slowly lifted her head and looked at a panting Dustin.

'That's okay, let's go,' she said, pulling Mike up with her, 'the food is bad here. They don't have Eggo'.

2. The Basement

THE BASEMENT

'Why is she here,' El blurted out, glaring across the room at Max.

Everyone was there, sitting cross-legged on the floor of Mike's basement. Steve had been waiting outside of the dance to give them a lift home and was happy to drop them at Mike's, hoping to catch another glimpse of Nancy. Eleven and Mike sat in the fort - her right knee touching his left - and the circle formed on either side of them.

'She's here with me,' Lucas snapped angrily, defending his new crush. Mike squeezed El's knee reassuringly, while Max looked defeated.

'Why do you hate me so much, I don't even know you,' she asked, softly. She was used to this kind of treatment, usually from her step-brother. It was unsettling to be on the receiving end of such coldness from the girl who had singlehandedly saved Hawkins.

'Exactly. We don't know you. This is our party,' Eleven clarified.

Mike turned to El and whispered, 'Just give her a chance, please. She's not replacing you, she couldn't.' That seemed to sate her somewhat, and her visibly tensed shoulders relaxed.

'Sorry.' Eleven spat, obviously not meaning it. The boys could read her by now - they were family.

'Thank you,' Max responded, unable to read the insincerity in her words. El smirked.

'Okay Will, tell them what you told me,' Dustin urged, anxious to cut through the tension. Joyce was upstairs having a coffee with Karen, unwilling to leave Will again so soon. They could hear the chatter through the open basement door.

'I saw The Upside Down,' Will whispered, 'and this time it's really bad, guys.'

3. The Upside Down

THE UPSIDE DOWN

'...so what exactly are you saying, Will?' Lucas asked, shaken by what his friend had just told him.

'I was dancing with that girl, the one who called me "Zombie Boy", and I looked around to see if I could spot you guys. And as I turned around, everything became dark, and ashen...but everyone was still there. I was there too, I was watching myself dancing. I was watching all of us dancing. But we weren't ourselves.'

'That other dimension, it makes sense. If it's a parallel universe, we would obviously exist there. Why haven't we seen this before?' Will asked, a hint of concern in his voice.

'We are smart. We would hide,' El remarked, catching on quickly.
'They are us.'

'...so what exactly are you saying, Will?' Lucas repeated.

'I went outside and The Shadow Monster was there. But it couldn't see me. It was just there...and Mike and El were sitting outside, holding hands.' He seemed to grimace at the last part.

'We were,' El stated. 'Is that funny Will?'

'It's a bit strange,' he answered slowly, counting his words.

'Lucas kissed her,' she rebutted, pointing at Max. 'Is that funny?'

'We're getting off topic here guys,' Dustin blurted out, 'Will saw us. We exist in The Upside Down. There are some freaky as hell versions of us at a freaking Snow Ball right now. What do we do?'

The group was silent for a while, but it was El who broke that silence with a, 'Shit. It's "shit", right?' She turned to Mike for reassurance. 'What are you trying to say?' he asked, gently.

"This is really bad",' she answered.

'Yeah, "shit".'

'Well shit then,' Eleven remarked.

4. Parallel

PARALLEL

'What is it, El?' Mike asked, concerned.

Eleven began, 'If we are there, I am there.'

Dustin caught on, next, shifting as he said, 'If El is there, there's an evil version of her with all of her abilities, waiting to crush us into dust.'

Lucas joined in. 'There are versions of all of us. That's what Will said, isn't it? There's a party of us, down there, upside down. What are they doing? They've been hiding, b-but for how long? And why? Will?'

Will wasn't there anymore. He was sitting there, in the basement, but he had gone back to the ball.

Cindy Laupers' "Time After Time" crackled eerily over the speakers, and the gym was empty now. The decorations which had looked vibrant and beautiful in his school gymnasium looked dull and faded here, like they had been hanging there for years rather than hours.

As he made his way across the floor - feeling braver than ever before, seemingly invisible this time - he was aware of his sneakers squeaking with every step; a sound only he could hear. He made it to the gym doors and stuck his hand out to open one of them; his hand passing right through it. His body followed and he was now in the hallway, which was also abandoned.

"Upside Down" by Diana Ross had just begun to play, and he could hear it clearly as he walked the halls, looking for anybody. He couldn't help but smirk. As he neared the AV Room, he heard voices. He slowed his steps, trying to be silent, before remembering he was practically a ghost.

Will came to with a start, startling everyone else in the process.

'What did you see there, Will?' Dustin asked, 'Are we in trouble?'

'I saw us...*them*,' Will responded. '...and they're coming. For us.'

5. The Discussion

THE DISCUSSION

'What do you mean they're coming for us?!" Dustin all but shrieked. The atmosphere in the room had shifted. Everyone was on edge, including El who was now firmly squeezing Mike's hand. He was squeezing back.

'I heard us - *them* - talking. They were talking about us. They want to open The Gate,' Will replied, feeling valuable for a change.

'Did you see *all* of us?' Lucas piped up.

'Yeah, we were all there,' Will answered.

'Well that's positive, if they have a Dustin they'll definitely screw something up - maybe take in a creature that tries to *murder everyone*, and that could buy us some time.'

Scowling, Dustin shot back with, 'Dart let us pass! I told you he trusted m-' 'Is that why you locked him in a basement?! Because he trusted you?!" Lucas quipped back, without letting Dustin finish.

'Enough!' El roared, and the room fell silent. Mere seconds passed before Joyce and Karen appeared at the basement door. 'Is everything alright down there?' Joyce enquired, nervously.

'Everything is fine, mom! El was just saying she danced enough tonight - I think we all did!' Will called back, impressed with his own acting ability - The Smoke Monster had changed him, made him stronger.

'Okay sweetie, I'm upstairs if you need me,' Joyce imparted, before returning to the kitchen with Karen for coffee and gossip.

'Off. Track.' El said, quietly this time, shooting daggers at Lucas and Dustin.

'I can open The Gate. So she can too.'

'Will, tell us what they were saying - tell us about them,' Mike urged.

'We were all there. They are a party, just like us. El hates Max *there*, too. They know we exist, they've seen us. Whatever we can do, they can do, too, I guess.'

'If we were all there, it means Upside Down Will isn't spying on us,' Mike said, somewhat reassuringly.

'Yet,' Max piped up, before feeling El's eyes resting heavily on her, and regretting opening her mouth.

'Mike, go tell our mom's we're all having a sleepover. We need to be close to each other before Hopper sends El back into hiding for another year,' Will said, having heard his mom talking to Jim.

'What,' Mike cried, looking to El for a denial of some sort.

'Ask your mom. It will be like when this was home,' she squeezed his knee and tried to smile. 'Ask your mom.'

6. The Fort

THE FORT

'If you want to sleep here, Will, I'm sleeping on the couch. Sorry, Karen.'

Will thought about arguing with his mother, but decided to save his breath. After what had just happened - the almost dying and all that, *again* - he knew he wouldn't win.

The two boys returned to the basement, having somehow convinced their mom's to let them have a sleepover. Will dug out some sleeping bags and pillows and passed them around. El was nestled inside the fort, where she planned on sleeping. Mike was angry. She tried to make eye contact, but he kept looking away, knowing he would cry again.

'We pick this up, first thing in the morning,' Lucas stated firmly, and the others murmured their agreement, having already started to drift off to sleep. Mike picked up his sleeping bag and started walking to the point in the room furthest away from the fort. He wasn't moving. He turned to see El - one hand out, nose bleeding - stopping him. Feeling physically and emotionally defeated, he threw the sleeping bag down and walked towards the fort, before sitting as far away from her as he could, once inside.

El looked over and saw he was crying. Not sobbing; just a few angry tears marked his cheeks. She reached for his hand but he pulled it away and rested it in his lap.

'Mike. Come here,' she said, softly. He wanted to scream "no!", but he couldn't. He was putty in her hands. She was his Kryptonite. So he begrudgingly found himself moving closer to her.

'You knew you were leaving me, and I had to find out from *Will*?' he whisper-shouted at her, so as not to wake their sleeping friends. A flash of sadness crossed her face which was replaced with a small smile. 'Mike. I'm *never* leaving you. Ever again. He can try. But I'm not going.'

'He did it before, El, and I lost you for almost a year. We lost each other. I can't go through that again. He's going to take you away from me and I...I've never felt this way about *anyone*.' The tears were still on his face, so she reached up to gently wipe them away.

'I feel it too. It's like bugs in here,' she pointed to her stomach, 'and I can't breathe. When I see you and *her*,' she gestured at a sleeping Max, 'I get angry. I am not going, Mike. *Friends don't lie*. You're my best friend. I...feel it too.'

Mike grabbed her hand and pulled her into him, wrapping an arm around her bony shoulders. 'Don't leave, El. And if you do, take me with you. I'd follow you anywhere.'

7. Breakfast

BREAKFAST

Sunlight crept through the tiny basement window, and El stirred. She looked around without lifting her head, and everyone was still asleep. Mike had slept next to her, one arm draped gently over hers, and she could feel the slow pulsing of his heartbeat against her spine. It was calming. She closed her eyes and drifted back to sleep, her heartbeat keeping time with his.

When she opened her eyes for a second time, the room was empty. She could hear Karen and Joyce upstairs with her friends (*and Max*) and she could smell breakfast wafting down the stairs. She could still feel Mike's heartbeat, but it was irregular now - he was awake. She's turned to face him.

'You're awake,' she stated, unsure as to why he hadn't gone up for breakfast with the others.

'I am,' he replied, sheepishly.

'Why are you lying down?'

'I didn't want to wake you. And I liked holding you. It felt safe.'

She understood what he meant. His arms felt like home - that word she had heard so much of, but knew so little about. Mike was safety.

'I...don't think...that the others...like us. *Together*,' Eleven said, slowly.

'I don't care what they think, and you shouldn't either,' Mike clarified, 'There's something between us and I know you feel it too.' Their faces were inches apart, and Mike planted a tiny, gentle kiss on her forehead.

'Are you hungry?' he asked with a smile, 'I've been hoarding Eggo's for a year.'

Upstairs, everyone was digging in to breakfast. Max reached for another waffle, but thought better of it once she saw Mike and Eleven

enter the kitchen. Joyce and Karen had moved to the living room, unknowing giving the kids some space and time to return to the matter at hand - their Upside Down selves.

Nobody should speak with food in their mouths, but this rule applied doubly to Dustin Henderson, whose lisp caused bits of scrambled egg to decorate the table as he excitedly spoke.

'Do we go to Hopper?! Doctor Owens?! What are we *doing* here, people?!"

'No,' El barked, waffle in hand. 'No Hopper.' She knew that if Jim was aware of this turn of events, she would be under house arrest until she was fifty. 'No doctors either.'

'We have to do something,' Lucas pleaded, before adding through gritted teeth, 'I have a *love interest* now!' Max rolled her eyes but said nothing - a wise move.

Will set down his fork and muttered, 'I have a plan, but *none* of you are going to like it.'

8. The Plan

THE PLAN

Will was right. Nobody liked his plan. The plan to reopen The Gate wasn't a plan, it was a suicide mission, and nobody was willing to be the kamikaze pilot. The party was back in the basement - fully satisfied from breakfast, and Joyce had *finally* gone home to rest. They were back in the circle, coming up with a game plan. The sun was streaming through the window by now, illuminating the cramped basement - dust particles dancing in the light.

'You need to leave,' El insisted to Max, breaking the deathly silence that had formed after Will had described his plan.

'Do you dislike me *that* much?' Max asked, her voice coated in pain. She looked up from under her eyelashes like a puppy and it made El's blood boil.

'It's for your safety. Go while you still can.' El snapped.

Lucas agreed, adding, 'We can't walk away from this campaign...but you *can*. Go home, Max, and we'll see you on Monday.'

Max was visibly upset, but unwilling to push any boundaries, so she gathered her things.

'I had a good evening with you *all*,' she said, making eye contact with Eleven to drive home the "all", in a hope to score some brownie (waffle?) points. It would never work - El had made up her mind, and her mind was unbending.

'I don't trust her.' El said, as soon as the door closed behind Max. 'Where did she come from.'

'California,' Dustin and Lucas replied, simultaneously. The "don't care" thing Steve had taught Dustin didn't apply if the girl wasn't there, he decided.

'She's cool, El, and I think you'd *really* get on with her if you gave her a chance,' Lucas urged.

'We're off topic again guys,' Mike added. 'Will, run through your plan again, and we can make a list of pros and cons. But I am *not* letting you put my girlfriend in danger - ever again.'

Girlfriend, Eleven mused. She didn't need clarity on the word, she had heard it many times on the TV during her isolation, but she had never been one. She let a small smile dance across her lips.

'We get El to open The Gate. We infiltrate, in disguise - blending in to look like them - Mike you can steal Nancy's make-up; we need to look grey. We take them out, one by one. Like stormtroopers' 'Stormtroopers have the *worst* coordination, Will. Are you suggesting we all get ourselves *killed*? Are you still the *spy*?' Dustin asked, only half-joking.

'Bad example just let me finish - we kill them one at a time and *replace* them, until we're all that's left, then we come back home, close The Gate, and leave The Upside Down behind us for the rest of our lives.'

'I hate that plan. I think that's the worst plan I've ever heard. You don't think The Shadow Monster will be able to tell us apart? You don't think we'll be ripped limb from limb within *minutes*. Come on, Will. I have no pros.' Mike was certain this plan was doomed to fail.

'We could just wait.' El offered. 'We have done that before. I beat it. We can beat it.'

'Yeah, I get that you heard them plotting, Will, but who's to say they'll ever actually do anything about it? Do you know us? They're probably playing D 'n D right now and talking about comics.' Dustin said, describing the exact thing he'd rather have been doing than having that conversation.

Will knew they were not playing D 'n D.

9. The Antiplan

THE ANTIPLAN

'We're going to open The Gate. We're going to capture one of them, and the rest will come to the rescue. You know them, that's what they do. They're a *party*.' Will spat the last sentence out like it was poison. Unbeknownst to the gang upstairs, it was. The stronger their friendship, the weaker their counterparts became; which is why El's hatred of Max worked to their advantage.

'So who do we take?' Lucas asked. 'We can't take Will, he knows the lay of the land too well - he's been here before. Jane, too. We need someone who would be oblivious. We need Dustin.'

Dustin scoffed. It seemed bickering transcended dimensions.

'We take Max.' Eleven concluded. 'She means nothing. She knows nothing. And Jane won't care. She won't help them. They will be *weak*.'

There were many contrasts between the two gangs, but a few things could never change - "Eleven and Mike" was one of them. Their connection spanned centuries and lifetimes and dimensions. Mike reached under the table and gave El's hand a gentle squeeze before declaring, 'Let's do it. Let's kill them all.'

10. The Decision

THE DECISION

'So you heard that? You heard *me* say "Let's kill them all"?' Mike asked, his voice riddled with disbelief. The sun was descending in the sky, and Hopper would be coming for El at nightfall.

'You *said* it, Mike. They have a plan, too. You might hate mine, but if we do nothing, you won't have to worry about El because you'll be *dead*. We'll *all* be dead.'

The room fell silent. They had been debating all day, and they were tired. There was a break in between when they went to fetch lunch upstairs, but other than that, they were at the drawing board. Lucas had come around about Will's plan when he had heard Max was in danger, and El and Mike were firmly on the side of doing nothing. That left Dustin as the swing vote - a job he wished he could reallocate.

'Shut *up* you guys, I can't think!' Dustin exclaimed, exasperated. 'I can't make a decision like this - I make the worst decisions under *normal* circumstances!' That was true, and Dart was evidence.

After what felt like hours - but was only a few minutes, Dustin had an answer.

'We're going to hide out. That's my decision. We leave tonight, and we find somewhere to camp for a few days while we figure this out. Somewhere safe and secluded.' Dustin had finally had a good idea. 'Go home, get clothes and supplies, and meet back here just before sunset. Start thinking of hideouts.'

Everyone had to agree, it was the most sensible thing to do.

'I know a place.' El announced. It made sense, she had spent longer in the wilderness than anyone, and had learned to survive.

'Okay, let's go then. We meet back here before sunset.'

Mike and El were alone again, and she had to tell him the truth.

'Mike...I can't stay. I will get you to the place. But then I have to go.'

'What are you talking about, El. You said you wouldn't *leave* again.' Mike's voice shook with frustration and he fought back tears.

'Hopper can't know anything is wrong. I want to show you something,' she said, taking his hand.

11. The Safe Space

THE SAFE SPACE

'Do you trust me, Mike?'

'Of course I trust you, El, with my life,' Mike sighed.

'Okay, close your eyes and *don't* open them until I say so,' El gently ordered.

A few moments passed, and a feeling came over Mike - it felt like floating. It was as if El had filled the room with water and they were adrift, holding hands. He could see the light fading from the room through his eyelids, but he kept them shut. He meant what he said - he did trust El with everything he had.

'Open your eyes, Mike.'

'El...what *is* this place?'

'It doesn't have a name. But it's how I found Will. And how I see you. When I'm not there.'

Mike took in his surroundings. For as far as he could see - in any direction - everything was blackness, and there was a thin layer of water on the floor.

'What did you do, El? *How* did you do this? How am *I* here?'

'I didn't do anything, Mike. *You* did this. I think it's our...connection. I can do this whenever I want. With my eyes closed,' she joked, offering a small smile. 'You got here by yourself, and you can do it again. Whenever you want to.'

'But I couldn't see you when you were gone,' his voice broke, 'I don't understand how this is happening.'

'You didn't know you could. None of the others can. You're...special. I *have* to leave, when we get to the camp, but we can meet here, every night. Time...stands still, here. And I will come to you all when I can.'

But Hooper *can't* know we're in trouble. I have to go with him.'

'You've never said that many words in a row before,' Mike said, sedated by the calmness of the never-ending black, and El's voice.

'It's this place. It's *our* place. I feel *free* here, with you. *Safe*. Nobody can find us here.'

'Okay, El,' Mike replied, gently. 'Tell me how to get back here.'

'Just think of me and close your eyes, and I'll be waiting here for you.'

12. Panic

PANIC

Lucas pulled up onto the curb outside Max's house, anticipating the worst. Maxine had warned Billy to leave her friends alone, but he was still extremely intimidating. With the temper of a maniac and driving like a bat out of hell, Lucas Sinclair was *not* going to get in his way.

He dragged his bike along the side of the house to where her bedroom window was, and set it down in the overgrown grass. Max was lying on her bed, headphones on, scribbling in a notebook. Lucas tapped gently on the glass, but she didn't stir. He tried a little harder - but still, nothing. He knew that if he knocked any harder, someone else could hear him. '*Shit*', he muttered, walking back around to the front door - he would have to go through Billy.

He reached the porch, his heart pounding with every step. He knew he had to be at Mike's soon, but he couldn't help but drag his feet. He reached for the door bell as slowly as he could, every possible thought running through his head. He closed his eyes and pushed the button.

The door swung open a few moments later, and Lucas was greeted by Billy's muscular frame, blocking the entire doorway.

'She's in her room,' he muttered, before turning back to his weightlifting. Lucas was confused. He took a deep breath and entered the house, keeping clear of Billy. Max's room was easy enough to find, and he pushed on the door. She looked up immediately.

'What are you *doing* here, Stalker?' She asked, pulling the headphones off her head and pushing the notebook aside.

'Pack a bag, Max. We need to hide out for a few days. Leave a note for your parents or something, and *hurry*.' Lucas started picking items of clothing up off of the floor and throwing them at her. She didn't move.

'What are you *talking* about? I'm not going *anywhere*.' She was determined.

'Will heard the others again, and they're going to *kidnap* you. And they think El won't help us if they do. You're in *danger*, and you're safer with us.'

'Make up your *mind*! You don't want me there and then you *do*?' She was frustrated, but had started to pile some of the clothes together and into a duffle bag.

'I want you *with* us, Max,' Lucas said, earnestly, 'I want you to be *safe*. Please just hurry up and pack, the party is leaving Mike's house at six.'

Max finished packing, and scribbled a quick note to her mom.

Staying with a friend for a few nights.

Will be home soon.

Love you, Max

'Come *on*!' Lucas urged, already on his bike.

'I'm *coming*!' Max yelled, grabbing her notebook and shutting her window behind her.

13. Rush

RUSH

'Dusty! Feed Tews before you leave!' Mrs Henderson yelled from the living room.

'Yeah ma, I *will!*' He shouted back, urgently throwing everything important into his backpack. What was important? He couldn't decide.

Dustin spoke to himself as he went around his room.

Flashlight? Yeah, that's important.

Nougat? Yes!

Warm clothes - sure.

Sleeping bag? Yup.

Farrah Fawcett hair spray? Can't do without it!

Dustin laughed to himself - he was so smooth. He flung the bag onto his back and went into the pantry, looking for the cat food.

'Okay ma, I'm going to be away for a few days, and I know you'll miss me *terribly* but I'll be home soon.' He didn't even wait for her reply before the screen door slammed behind him and he was on his bike. He was meeting Will at The Byers house, and they were cycling to Mike together - Joyce wouldn't have it any other way.

'Mom I *promise* you *nothing is going to happen to me*. I promise. El closed The Gate. We're just going camping for a few days before everyone goes away for Christmas.' Convincing Joyce to let Will out of her sight so soon after everything that had happened was a task. Eventually, she agreed - too afraid to say "no", and have him run away, anyway.

'You have to find a *phone*, Will! And phone me *every day!*' She yelled at the boys as they cycled down the driveway.

'I will, mom! And I'll see you *soon!*' Will yelled back.

The sun was crawling towards the horizon, and they pedalled faster. The others wouldn't leave without them, but they couldn't risk being late anyway. The clock was ticking, and they had to find safety as soon as possible. The dead leaves from the naked trees that lined the road danced in front of them, and crunched beneath their tires as they raced towards the Wheeler house.

14. Magic

MAGIC

When Mike opened his eyes again, he became acutely aware of the setting sun, and that his friends would be returning soon. He had enjoyed *hours* with El, but the clock showed that not even a minute had passed since she took his hand. She was still dressed in her Snow Ball gown - something Mike feared might rouse suspicion if they were seen hiking through the wilderness.

'We need to get you a new *outfit*,' Mike mused, gently pulling on her hand. She followed him up to Nancy's room, and watched as he opened the cupboard. She was in awe. Nancy Wheeler had the best wardrobe, and El could pick anything she liked - not that Mike had asked Nancy, but when did he ever?

El spent a few minutes looking over the options, before settling on a pair of ripped jeans and a ridiculously bold jacket.

'Open your eyes,' she said to Mike for the second time in under ten minutes. 'What do you think?'

What did he think? Mike couldn't tell. He was so enamoured by the girl before him that she would have looked beautiful in a potato sack...this was quite a few steps up from that. He somehow managed to muster up a, 'Wow,' and continued to stare like a lovesick puppy. El was not used to the attention, and blushed.

'It's your turn,' she said, seriously. 'Let's pack.'

El had never been in Mike's room before. When he opened the door, she was awestruck by all of his belongings. She had never owned anything.

'El, are you *alright*?' Mike asked, concerned. He reached for a bag in his cupboard, and she had still not moved from the doorway - her eyes scanning every surface of the room and eventually settling on his bed. She walked towards it and sat down on the edge.

'You...have so much stuff,' she said, her voice barely a whisper.

'My mom just made me give a whole *box* of stuff away,' he said with a hint of humour in his voice, before realising why El was so upset.

'I have something for you,' he said, reaching for his bookshelf, 'I think you're going to like it.' He pulled a black ball from the shelf and handed it to Eleven.

'What is *it*,' she asked, turning the ball around in her hands. There was an "8" on one side of it, and a window on the other.

'It's a Magic 8 Ball, El,' Mike said with a smile. 'You hold it in your hands and you ask it a question and you shake, and it tells you the answer - look here. *Is El my best friend in the world?*' He gave the ball a shake and turned it over - Yes.

'How does it work?' She asked, amazed. It was crazy to think that this girl with so much power and strength was so amazed by this gimmick, Mike thought.

'It's magic, El. Like *you*.' He rested his head on her shoulder. 'That's why it's perfect for *you*.'

15. The Sanctuary

THE SANCTUARY

Mike and El were waiting in the driveway by the time the others arrived. Dustin and Will got there first, followed shortly after by Lucas and Max. It was decided that Mike would lead the way, with El directing him. She loved being on the back of his bike, holding him, talking into his ear. She clasped her hands around his waist and directed him. *Straight. Straight. Left. Straight. Right. Right. Straight.* The group approached a clearing, and Mike stopped.

'We walk from here,' El announced, to the chagrin of everyone but Mike, who loved any reason to spend more time with her.

'This way,' she offered, and they started walking.

The path was full of hills and dips, and it was long. It was also getting dark by now - *good thing I brought my flashlight*, Dustin mused to himself. After ten minutes of walking, they spotted a building beneath the trees. Dustin and Lucas - who had complained the whole way there - were excited to see something other than trees. As they got closer, they realised the magnitude of the building. It was *huge*.

'El, how did you *find* this place,' Mike asked, his voice laden with concern.

'I was walking.' El could be so oblivious.

'No way I'm staying in there! Nope! Sorry!' Dustin yelled, taking three large steps backwards. El, brows furrowed, shook her head.

'What is wrong with it,' she asked, firmly. She had just brought them to their sanctuary and they were all looking at her like she was crazy.

'Did you stay inside *this* building? This one,' Will pointed, 'right *here*?'

'Yes.'

Everyone was silent for a while, the only noise coming from the rolling leaves and the crickets.

'Do you know what it *is*?' Lucas asked, breaking the silence.

'It's a hospital. There was hospital stuff inside.'

'Guys, can I just -' Mike pulled El aside and put a hand on each of her shoulders, so he could look directly at her face. The others were chattering amongst themselves - mostly about finding somewhere else to stay.

'El, the sign says *Hawkins Sanitarium*. Do you know what that *means*?' The building was visibly decrepit and undisturbed.

She shook her head "no".

'It's a hospital, you were right, but for *crazy* people. It might not be safe for us to stay here.'

'It's empty. I stayed for three days. It's safe,' El urged, 'I won't let you be unsafe, Mike.'

'We're going to stay here for the night,' Mike announced. 'It's too dark to find somewhere else, and El says it's safe.'

'El, you're sleeping next to *me* tonight!' Dustin interjected.

'El isn't staying with us.' Mike had a lump in his throat which he tried to ignore. 'She can't let Hopper get suspicious. She's leaving once we're inside. So hurry up.'

'*Man*, I did *not* sign up for this!' Lucas grumbled, dragging his bike closer to the entrance.

'Follow me,' El prompted, grabbing Dustin's torch and pushing on the ajar front door.

16. Interior

INTERIOR

Hawkins Sanitarium was impossibly large. The building spanned several acres, and the passages were a maze. Everyone wondered how they had never seen or heard of this place, only a few miles from their homes, buried deep within a forest. Did they mean it that way - for this place to remain hidden in plain sight, easy enough for a young girl to stumble over, lost and looking for refuge? El navigated like she had walked the route a million times; the others trudging along behind her, miserable and scared.

A whistling noise echoed throughout the building; windows broken from the elements allowing air inside. Nobody had been here in years, it seemed. It was completely abandoned. A thick layer of dust coated every surface, Mike noticed; careful not to touch anything. Their footsteps created a path that would be easy enough to follow out if need be. Max reached for Lucas in the darkness, grasping his hand. Their palms were sweaty from their frazzled nerves. Dustin suggested turning back, before Will reminded him of everything they had faced before. *Nothing* in this building could be as scary as what they had already survived.

They arrived at what had seemed to be an office once. Mike immediately spotted where El had slept. She had dragged items from around the room, doing her best to recreate Mike's fort - the one that felt safe, the one she found solace in when she was scared. He smiled, but also felt a twinge of sadness. Had he known that El was in Hawkins the whole time, he would have stopped at nothing to find her.

'This is it,' she announced, sweeping her arm around for emphasis. 'You will be safe here.'

'Yeah I don't know so much,' Dustin muttered, throwing his things down. The room was in complete darkness, save for the light from his torch. Will pulled a camping torch out of his bag and set it in the middle of the floor, illuminating everything within a five foot radius. Only the outskirts of the room were left in darkness.

'I should go now,' El said to Mike, shifting from foot to foot. 'Hopper will be coming for me soon.'

'She's *really* not staying? *Man*, we are so screwed,' Lucas whinged.

'It will be okay,' Max whispered with a smile, setting her bag down next to his. Everyone was silent, and they became aware of how loud and piercing that whistle was.

'Call if you need me,' El urged to Mike while turning for the door.

'Wait, El, you need a walkie,' Will said, offering her his. El took it, knowing she would not need it.

17. Bump In The Night

BUMP IN THE NIGHT

'Mike...*Mike*. Mike are you *awake*? *Mike!*'

Mike came to with a start. Will was inches from his face, a concerned look in his eyes.

'What is it, *Will*? What happened?' Mike urged.

'I...*need* to pee. Can you come with me?'

'What *time* is it?' Mike groaned.

'I don't know. Will you come with me? It's *urgent*,' Will pleaded. Mike slowly climbed out of the fort that El had built; careful not to move anything; and picked up the camping torch, leaving the room in darkness. Will was jumping from leg to leg, desperate for a toilet.

'Did you see a bathroom on the way in?' Mike asked Will, leading the way into the passage.

'I think there's one around the corner.'

Mike waited outside the bathroom for Will, looking up and down the passage - standing guard. He saw the paint peeling off of the walls. He listened to the whistling, and the trees outside, swaying in the wind. *This isn't so bad*, he thought. Suddenly he heard a creaking sound nearing, so he lightly rapped on the door.

'Will, *hurry!*' He whispered, the sound getting closer and closer with each second. '*Will!*'

He opened the bathroom door and went inside, shutting it behind him, his heart hammering against his ribs.

'Will, someone is *out* there! Someone is *coming!*' Will joined him behind the door. The noise continued, and then stopped...right outside the door.

'Who is it?' Mike mouthed, too afraid to make a sound.

'I don't know!' Will mouthed back, pulling Mike into a toilet stall and shutting it behind them. Just then, the bathroom door creaked open, slowly. Someone was coming in. Small footsteps could be heard - as if the perpetrator were trying to be quiet. A shadow loomed under the door. Will squeezed Mike's arm, as Mike lifted the lid off of the cistern; ready to attack.

'Mike, is that *you*?' El whispered. Mike heaved a huge sigh of relief, before shaking himself loose of Will's death-grip and laying his weapon down. He unlocked the door.

'What are you *doing* here?' He asked, 'What *time* is it?'

'It's after nine,' she said.

'After *nine*? At *night*?' Will asked, confused.

'No. It's morning.'

The trees surrounding the hospital blocked out most of the light, they learned, as El lead the party outside. The sun filtered through the leaves, making shadows dance across the earth, emulating glitter. El had laid out a blanket and had a small fire burning. She had also brought Eggos.

'You were safe?' She asked, as they all dug in to their waffles.

'Yeah I guess, but *someone* wouldn't stop moaning in their *sleep*,' Dustin complained.

'I heard that too,' Will offered.

'So did we,' Lucas said on behalf of himself and Max who had been woken by the noise at the same time.

'Guys, it wasn't *me*,' Mike clarified. 'I thought it was *Will*.'

18. Gotcha

GOTCHA

'Did you see them, El? Where are they?'

El removed her blindfold, exhausted. It was a lot harder to locate people across dimensions, and she just couldn't see anything.

'I'm sorry,' she sighed, 'I can't find them. They aren't anywhere we've seen before. I don't know where they are.'

'Nice, El. That's helpful,' Will sneered, banging his fist down on the table.

'Don't get upset with her, she did her best,' Mike snapped.

The anti-party had been at loggerheads for days, unable to pin their alter egos down. They were missing without a trace.

Across the table, Dustin sat reading a book called "The Large Scale Structure of Space-Time" by Stephen Hawking. Lucas laughed out loud.

'How are *you* a genius, man? Like, you're the *smartest* guy I know, and that buffoon running around looking like you is such an *idiot*! How does that work?'

'It's an alternate reality, Lucas.' Dustin explained, rubbing the bridge of his nose. 'Obviously *I* am a genius, and that other version of me got the short end of the stick.'

'So which one of you is the *real* Dustin?' Max asked, tentatively.

'We're both "real", we both *exist*. I like to think I am the truest form of Dustin, though. God forbid anyone were *actually* that stupid on purpose.'

'Are we already losing here?' Mike interrupted. 'Is this even *worth* it?' He was exasperated. 'Will, can't we just stay here? We've been fine here our whole lives.'

Will was unresponsive.

'Will? *Will!*' Mike gave his oldest friend a firm shake, but nothing happened. 'Something is wrong with Will, you guys! Is it them? Have they *done* something?!"

Suddenly, Will gasped for air before a deep, sadistic smile spread across his face.

'Pack your bags,' he said to the table. 'I've found them.'

19. Lost And Found

LOST AND FOUND

The party was having a stare-off. Someone - or *something* - had kept them up all night, and they all feigned ignorance. Was someone else in the hospital? No, it couldn't be so. They turned their faces to the building they had slept in the night before, shaken to their cores.

'Does it *really* matter what it was? I don't need any of the stuff I left inside, let's just *leave!*' Dustin suggested, before adding, 'Shit, my hairspr- never *mind*, let's go!'

'I second that,' Lucas said, while Mike nodded her head like a dashboard dog.

'We *have* to go back inside, everything is in *there*,' Will said, wishing it wasn't true.

'He's right,' Mike concluded. 'We have to fetch our things and *then* we can leave. That stuff is important.'

Lucas and Dustin exchanged a glance before both shouting, 'I'll stand lookout!' at exactly the same time.

'You know *what?*' Mike started, before giving up. 'That's fine. You three stay out here, and we'll get the bags.'

'Maybe someone could hold *my* hand, *too?*' Will pleaded, as the trio made their way to the office. El took his hand in hers. He sighed, relieved. Mike squeezed the hand she had offered him, and she squeezed back. They entered the room and collected everyone's belongings, throwing items into bags - they could swap, later. Will picked up the camping torch from the centre of the room and looked around to make sure nothing was left behind, before trailing after El and Mike as they lead the way back outside to safety. He dug around in his backpack and noticed his jacket was missing. It must have been put into someone else's bag.

The three made it back outside and El shut the door.

'My red jacket is in one of your bags,' Will announced, as everyone exchanged belongings.

'Does someone have my notebook?' Max asked.

'Yeah, I'm missing something *too*,' Dustin added.

'What are you missing, Dustin?' Lucas asked, intrigued.

'You know, it wasn't important *anyway*?' He could buy more hair spray.

'Sorry Max, I haven't got your notebook,' Will told her, as the others agreed. Nobody had Will's jacket, either.

They started walking away from the asylum, bickering as they went. It seemed they were all missing something, but did not want to think about where their things could have gone. They were so involved in their argument about who took what, that nobody seemed to notice the silhouette in one of the upstairs windows.

20. Follow The Leader

FOLLOW THE LEADER

'Mike, someone is following us,' El whispered. They were walking back to the clearing when she felt someone tailing them.

'Are you *sure*?'

'I'm sure.' El stopped walking and turned around.

'What are you *doing*?' Lucas implored, confused, 'It's the *other* way, isn't it?'

'Someone is following us,' Mike answered. Everyone stopped dead in their tracks.

'Maybe it's the person who took our *things*,' Will offered, not helping the situation.

They could all hear it now - the distinct crunching sound moving closer.

'What do we *do*!?' Dustin cried, pulling out his flashlight to use as a weapon. Mike picked up a rock and handed it to Will before picking up a log for himself. The noise grew, seemingly coming from all directions at once. Suddenly, it stopped. They looked around - hearts racing - unable to spot anyone or anything. Then, a figure stepped out from behind a tree.

'Steve!?' They yelled, simultaneously.

'What the *hell* are you brats doing!?' He yelled back. 'I dropped you off after the dance and now you're back to your *tricks* again? What's going on *here*!?'

'Your *hair* is looking particularly great today, Steve. Something you want to tell us?' Dustin remarked.

'Hey Steve, do you have my *jacket*?' Will asked, ignoring the look on his face.

'What is *wrong* with you kids, *seriously*. That's what you want to know? If I have your *jacket*?! No, I don't have your *jacket*! I didn't even go *inside* that shit-hole, maybe you left it in there.'

'How did you find us?' Mike asked, concerned. If Steve could find them, maybe their spot wasn't so secluded after all.

'Uh. I, uh.' Steve was having a hard time saying what he needed to say, 'I uhhh...I followed her here this morning,' he said, gesturing at Eleven.

'What,' El demanded.

'Hey *don't* get mad at *me*! Hopper asked me to! He said he knew you were up to something!'

El was mad. She squeezed her fist into a ball, trying to control herself.

'Listen shit heads, I don't know what you're up to but can we walk and talk, please. This place gives me the *creeps*.'

21. The Pool House

THE POOL HOUSE

'If Nancy finds out about this there's *no* way she's taking me back,' Steve muttered as he held open the door to the pool room, ushering his brats inside. Steve's house was the most logical place for them to hide out, they decided.

'Don't *touch* anything!' He yelled, as Max's bag brushed a photo frame from the mantle piece. He caught it just in time.

'Chill out *man*,' Dustin implored. 'We *won't* touch anything.'

They had made the journey from the clearing to Steve's house, avoiding anyone they knew along the way. Nobody could know where they were hiding - it was not safe. Steve begrudgingly allowed them access to his parents pool house because it was winter, and nobody would be using it.

'I'll bring you turds some food later. And remember, *don't. Touch. Anything.* And close the blinds.' Steve locked them inside.

'Is anyone *else* picking up that he is being a bit of an ass?' Max asked as soon as they were alone.

'Nah man! Steve is *awesome!* You should have seen him before, he was *totally* an ass. He used to beat up Will's brother and *everything*. He's just worried about us now,' Dustin gushed.

'Yeah, he's *definitely* improved,' Mike confirmed. El was sulking.

'Hey, are you okay?' Mike asked gently.

'No,' she spat back, visibly hurt. The pool house was small and cramped, and privacy was not an option. Mike closed his eyes.

She was there when he opened them - in their space.

'El, *talk* to me,' Mike suggested, moving closer to her.

'He doesn't trust me,' she whispered, sounding defeated.

'I'm not on his side, like, *at all*, but do you blame him? We *are* up to something - he's not *wrong*. Maybe...maybe we need to tell him about this?'

'No!' She cried. 'No, Mike. He will lock me away again.' Tears ran down her cheeks. 'I can't be away from you. For that long. Ever again.'

'I know what you mean,' he replied, 'I can't either.'

Back in the pool room, they opened their eyes. The others were still debating the pros and cons of their host - his hair and his skills with a bat, amongst the highlights. Just then, the photo frame that Max almost knocked fell clean off the mantle piece and smashed.

'Don't look at *me*,' she offered, but it didn't take long before everything else started falling, too. Furniture, vases, golf clubs - the ground shook violently and they huddled together, waiting for it to be over. As suddenly as it had started, it stopped.

'That was some earthquake,' Max exclaimed as she pushed her ginger hair out of her eyes.

'That was not an earthquake,' Will said, solemnly. 'They're *here*.'